

Ridgeland
Chamounix Drive, Fairmount Park
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS
PA
51-PHILA
395-

PHOTOGRAPHS

ADDENDUM TO
RIDGELAND
(Mount Prospect)
Chamounix Drive
Fairmount Park
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1664

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL & DESCRIPTIVE DATA
PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington D.C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ADDENDUM TO:
RIDGELAND
(Mount Prospect)

HABS NO. PA-1664

Location: Approximately 825' south of Chamounix Drive and 750' east of Belmont Mansion Drive, West Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: Ridgeland was built for William Couch by 1762 and is, potentially, one of the oldest houses in Fairmount Park. Unlike the villas that prosperous Philadelphians erected in the Schuylkill River Valley during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Ridgeland apparently started out as a farm house and did not serve as a rural retreat until the 1790s. The house is also unusual in that it received lavish alterations after being incorporated into the Park and is still accompanied by multiple nineteenth-century outbuildings.

Description: Situated on a hill northwest of the Schuylkill River, Ridgeland is a two-and-a-half story, gable-roofed house with multiple additions. The original structure, built of Wissahickon schist rubble, is rectangular in plan: three bays wide and two bays deep. The main entrance lies at the center of the northwestern gable end and is sheltered by a small, pedimented porch with elongated Tuscan columns. A larger, more formal porch with similar columns adorns the southeastern or garden facade which, unlike the other walls, is stuccoed. Fenestration is symmetrical except on the northwestern side, consisting of twelve-over-twelve-light sashes on the first floor and eight-over-eight-light sashes on the second. Two small, oval windows pierce first and second stories of the northwestern facade while a divided, semicircular window lights the southeastern gable. Chimneys protrude from the roof north of center and at the southwestern end. Notable interior features include vestiges of a basement kitchen (a cooking fireplace and a washing stone), Federal-style mantelpieces, and elaborate parquet floors. Wood-frame extensions with stone foundations adjoin the northeastern end of the house. At the northern corner stands a two-story, gable-roofed structure with clapboard and flushboard siding and a massive chimney. East of this is another two-story, clapboarded addition with a gable roof, dentilled cornice and semi-octagonal southeastern wall. Finally, a one-story, clapboarded kitchen wing forms the northeastern extremity of the house. Two barns, a well-preserved ice house and a collapsing structure identified as "the schoolhouse" also occupy the site.

History: In 1718, yeoman William Couch bought a twenty-five acre tract of land off Lime Kiln Road and appears to have built Ridgeland there sometime between 1752 and 1762 (Lambert, p.3, 8,12). Thereafter, his son Daniel acquired the farm, but debt prevented him from retaining it for long. Reese Meredith, a prominent Philadelphia merchant and real estate investor,

purchased the Couch estate at a 1766 sheriff's sale. When Meredith died in 1784, his daughter Elizabeth and her husband George Clymer received Ridgeland. A one-time Continental Congressman and signer of the Declaration of Independence, Clymer made his money by the same means as Reese. However, the Reese and Clymer families seem to have rented out the property rather than occupying it themselves.

Only after 1794, when George Clymer sold Ridgeland to Francis Johnston, did the house begin to function as retreat, joining the ranks of nearby Belmont Mansion and other villas in the Schuylkill River valley. Johnston, who worked as Receiver General for the Philadelphia Land Office, owned the estate outright until 1806 and then indirectly until 1814. In the meantime, he apparently equipped Ridgeland with a new, Federal-style interior, added both porches and erected the "frame dwelling" mentioned in late 1790s tax assessments. The latter structure's dimensions correspond to those of the northern addition and it is possible that they are one in the same; certainly an addition of comparable size occupied the same site during the nineteenth century.

In 1814, Jacob S. Waln acquired Ridgeland. Like Meredith and Clymer, Waln was a merchant, and like Johnston he used the house as a secondary residence. After Waln's death in 1850, the property passed to his children who, in turn, sold it to the City of Philadelphia in 1869. Once incorporated into Fairmount Park, the house was occupied by high-ranking Park officials and underwent major remodelling in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition to numerous interior alterations, the work included constructing the "octagonal" wing and several others designed to house service space on the first floor and bedrooms above. As part of a 1944 renovation, the turn-of-the-century additions were partially demolished and the kitchen space was reconfigured, giving the northeastern end of the house its present form. At an indeterminate time, stucco was applied to both gable ends and subsequently removed from the northwestern one. The Fairmount Park Commission has used Ridgeland for office space in recent years.

Sources:

Engineer's Notebook (ca. 1866-67), Fairmount Park Commission,
Office of the Park Historian, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Lambert, Cathleen. "Ridgeland Mansion, Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, PA," a report compiled for University of Pennsylvania Professor Roger W. Moss, 1994; includes substantial bibliography and the following appendices: National Register nomination (also by Lambert), site maps and floor plans, William Couch's estate inventory (photocopy

and transcription), Philadelphia Gazette articles related to William Couch (transcriptions), relevant state and county tax records (transcriptions), and a list of early views.

Ridgeland Files and relevant maps, Fairmount Park Commission, Office of the Park Historian, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Scheerer, Cissy. "A Historical Survey of Ridgeland Mansion," 1980. An unpublished manuscript located in Park Commission Files.

Historian: Aaron Wunsch, HABS Summer Historian.

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